A View from 1967 Forward…

In 1966 Nashville Davidson County had recently passed an ordinance creating the Metropolitan Human Relations Commission. In 1967, the Metropolitan Human Relations Commission hired a staff consisting of an executive director, associate director, and a secretary. This new Commission, under the guidance of its board of directors, began to charter its course towards an enlightened period of race relations. It was the hope of the Commission that Nashville Davidson County, as well as America in general, could begin to develop constructs for communication among racially different residents. This was to be a starting point. Hopefully, and with proper assistance, people would begin to see the interconnectedness of humankind.

The task of the Commission was to formulate strategies for engaging a diverse metropolitan community in such dialogue. The board of the commission represented each segment of the city. The Mayor of Nashville Davidson County, Beverly Briley, a former county judge, brought to this proposition the type of leadership that fit

the social and political atmosphere of the nineteen sixties. The metro council was comprised of leaders from the various townships and geographic identities that comprised this new form of government.

Initially, the Commission was housed in the Mayor's administrative suite. Bob Horton, executive administrative assistant to the Mayor, and Mrs. Green helped the Commission to cut through some of the bureaucratic road blocks, inherent in government. While that relationship was vital to the Commission's initial identity, it was clear to me, as the executive director that we had to get out of the Mayor's office. Our move to the Stahlman Building, shortly thereafter, did not alienate us from the Mayor's office. In fact, the move facilitated the Commission's ability to move freely among various subsets of Metro Nashville, especially among the African American neighborhoods. This was important due to the strained and ineffective efforts in the past to establish communications between those neighborhoods and metro government. South Nashville and north Nashville (especially along Jefferson Street), posed a challenge to the newly formed government-sponsored Human

Relations Commission. The Commission needed to prove itself, as an asset to both the communities and local government.

In some quarters of the Nashville community the Human Relations Commission was seen as a concession to the Black community. Hence, calls began to flood the Commission, alerting it to any direct or indirect intervention by the police or other government agencies. Without authority to hold hearings and subpoena witnesses, either police or citizen, the Commission had to rely on the Metro Council to hear complaints and sort out the reports. We reported on cases of neglect and hazardous living conditions, some of which was "a stone's throw" from the State Capitol building. One example was Ireland and Tenth streets, where each shanty was without electricity and water. A common privy stood in the center of the collection of shacks. This was not the only one, but it was unique in that it was visible from the highest seat of government, and not far from the county courthouse. In this single case there were clear violations of several municipal codes. It had

been allowed to continue in spite of the surrounding community's outcry. It continued until Camilla Cauldwell, director of the Welfare Department, sent two social workers, Joe Batson and Bob Meadors to maintain an outreach center there (in a mechanic's garage). Probably the resolution of that set of problems was aided by the embarrassment of exposure in the media, but the lesson we learned was that there is value in telling the story to more than one office or organization. Following this course of reasoning, we kept federal agencies aware as we informed local government. In the end, the residents of this unfortunate section were resettled in upgraded housing. The property owner was put on notice. This was the beginning of the Commission's interest in making housing a part of its agenda. Employment or the lack thereof was a natural component in poor housing. By the end of our first year, we had attracted both support as well as condemnation from all sides. We began to sense that this is how it would always be. But, that is the challenge if we are to evolve as an effective facilitator of cultural and political balance among competing interests.

Due to the nature of the Commission's purpose, to informally investigate grievances and defer them to the Council and/or the Mayor's office for direct action, there was never a consensus on the importance of its creation.

Two incidents may serve to dramatize this ambivalence about the Commission:

> During a student protest in North Nashville, near the Fisk campus, Dr. Edwin Mitchell, the Commission's first Chairman, tried to talk to the perceived leaders of the protest. For his efforts, he was hit by a brick and taken to Meharry Hospital, with a head injury. Shortly after that incident, I was called by Vista workers to intervene in their arrests by the Metro police. Upon my arrival at the Metro Police Station, I was attacked by a police officer, who insisted that I was the leader of the protest at the city auditorium. The arrest of the Executive Director forced the Commission's Board to confront the

police. The Commissioners, led by Rev. Andrew White, met with Chief Kemp and clarified the official duties of the Executive Director. The arrest of the Commission's Director proved to the community, especially North and South Nashville, that the Commission was not an extension of the Mayor's office.

As a result of our personal experience with the police, we were able to convince the Mayor and Chief of Police to allow the Commission to assemble a sensitivity training program for police officers. The training was conducted by Peabody, Vanderbilt, and Tennessee State University professors, at the Police Academy.

Hopefully that brief sketch will give you a clearer picture of the times in which the Commission was created and how it was perceived. As the Executive Director and the Associate Director, Dr. Fred Cloud, sought to present the Commission as a friendly arm of local government, it became obvious that a creditable program was needed. Such a program should carry some measure of relief from government-tolerated disparities. This was our first

challenge to locate and describe the primary causes of poor living conditions, mal-treatment by police officers, and occasionally, the Governor's National Guard. Our first steps were primarily as a "watch committee." We walked with protesters to document both their behavior and that of the police. We joined other groups to watch the actions of the National Guard, whenever they deployed to Tennessee State University and its immediate area. We would systematically report our findings to our Board and they would work through their contacts to prevent protracted abuse. One of our greatest assets at the time was an intelligent morning newspaper, The Tennessean, whose editor, John Siegenthaler, had long been engaged in struggles against abuse. Fred and I got to know Mr. Siegenthaler quite well. We were invited to his home to discuss our strategies.

Fred Cloud was the perfect person for a role in developing the Commissions' agenda. As an accomplished writer, with a long history in Nashville, he quickly made contacts through the church establishment

that helped us to assess the extent to which the broader community was prepared to engage in the dynamics of cultural change. He was not always welcomed by that establishment, or for that matter, his own neighborhood. Fred, true to his creed, persisted and later spent a career as Executive Director of the Commission, as President of the Association of Human Rights Workers, and a leader in the fair housing movement.

Today, as this panel will discuss, the landscape has changed. The initial laws in human and civil rights coverage have been broadened, amended, challenged and in a few cases, corrupted by political appointees who occupy our highest courts. This Commission, after fifty years, is yet not a law firm. It has, in spite of perceptions, not become an advocacy group. It is still a part of local government. It is the manifestation of the general citizenry's aspiration for a clear voice, and leverage at the center of power. It should work within the fabric of government to monitor the delivery of services, and maintain an unbiased position as it reports its findings to both the Commission's Board, as well as the Metro

Council. Ultimately, its existence and functioning should help Nashville Davidson County to achieve its goal of becoming a multi-cultural, progressive center, where it is not a strain to envision it as the “Athens of the South.”

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